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SUBJECT: DCM VISIT HIGHLIGHTS U.S. COMMITMENT TO PEACE IN MINDANAO

REF: 06 MANILA 4553

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Visiting Muslim Mindanao's cultural and religious hub in Marawi City, DCM spoke at Peace Week opening ceremonies, highlighting the American people's commitment to the ongoing peace process and U.S. interest in helping Mindanao achieve a peaceful and prosperous future. He reiterated these themes throughout a November 28-29 visit at USAID projects; in meetings with municipal, military, religious, and academic leaders; and during a live radio interview. Civic and government leaders spoke positively about the peace process and appreciated our support. The enthusiastic reception at all events in this Muslim-majority city was reminiscent of the Ambassador's October 2006 visit (reftel). End Summary.

THE ISLAMIC CITY OF MARAWI

¶2. (U) Marawi City is Lanao del Sur's principal city, as well as Muslim Mindanao's educational, cultural, and religious center. The city is part of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and over 90 percent of Marawi's 131,000 residents are Muslim. Arabic is widely taught among the city's students; many local residents can read, write, and speak some Arabic, as well as the local Maranao dialect. The ARMM receives 98 percent of its operating revenue from the national government and has no other significant sources of revenue. The ARMM region ranks at the bottom of all Philippine regions in terms of income and human development, such as spending on education and infrastructure. The local economy is largely based on agriculture and exporting.

EXAMINING THE PEACE PROCESS WITH LOCAL LEADERS

¶3. (SBU) Former governor of Lanao del Sur, and leading Muslim ulama, Mahid Mutilan, expressed optimism for the government peace negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) insurgents. He cautioned, however, that confidence-building and demonstrable implementation at each step along the way will be necessary. Mutilan recalled a conversation with previous MILF leader Hashim Salamat in which Salamat said the MILF would agree to a comprehensive peace, but not until promised government development programs were actually implemented. (Mutilan was tragically killed in a car accident just days after dinner with DCM.)

¶4. (SBU) The DCM asked local government officials, academic leaders, and the city's former Mayor, Omar "Solitario" Ali whether the current conflict is rooted in a lack of development, an inability to create governance structures, or religious differences. Solitario insisted that a federalist structure would most effectively assure stability and peace, while others observed that development is necessary for a peace agreement. Another offered that once local people are empowered to manage their social and governance structures, rebellion would be unnecessary. Overall, contacts were optimistic about the peace process, although several bemoaned the lengthy progression. Asked how the U.S. could contribute to the process, several interlocutors responded that the U.S. should help speed it up.

¶5. (U) Some leaders told DCM that if Maranaos were not Muslim, they would not be perceived as a "problem" but simply as another population of poor Filipinos. They explained that as Muslims, they seek to follow Muslim traditions, including eating their own food, practicing their religion, and establishing alternative government structures. A city councilman suggested that Maranao alienation is deep rooted, with some Maranaos not accepting they are Filipino

because of the Christian and Spanish background it connotes.

LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

¶6. (SBU) The local and provincial Chiefs of Police, as well as local government leaders formerly part of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) leadership, told DCM they maintain contact with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Police officials said they cannot enter MILF-controlled areas on the outskirts of Lake Lanao, including an active MILF camp, without coordinating with MILF leaders through the Ad hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG). They stated that family feuds are the biggest regional law enforcement problem.

¶7. (U) The Marawi Police Station is one of ten model police stations under the Philippines National Police (PNP)'s transformation program. Starting in December 2007, the station will receive U.S. Department of Justice police training focused on community policing. Students will learn strategies for engaging the public in the law enforcement process. While welcoming the program's emphasis on community policing, local and regional chiefs told DCM they most needed vehicles and radios to become more effective.

"PEACE WEEK" AT MINDANAO STATE UNIVERSITY

¶8. (U) In support of Mindanao's "Peace Week," DCM delivered a message at Mindanao State University's Opening Ceremonies on November 29. MILF officials, 17 participating NGOs, and thousands of university students and faculty attended. A Joint Special Operations Task Force medical civil affairs program on December 4, "Peace Week"'s culminating event, was widely and enthusiastically anticipated by the community.

¶9. (U) In a meeting with DCM, Mindanao State University President Richard De Leon emphasized the University's mission of creating a common understanding across religions. The University boasts an equal mix of Christians and Muslims among its students and focuses on teaching empathy and respect for diversity. The University offers an interdisciplinary Master of Arts in Global Studies Major in American Studies, including several courses related to the United States. De Leon outlined a proposal for an Institute for Religious

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Studies that would engage with clergy and those interested in the study of world religions to facilitate exchange of ideas between universities and religious organizations in America and the Philippines. The DCM led a roundtable discussion at the U.S. supported American Studies Resource Center with 25 students from various programs. The students were enthusiastic and engaged, offering questions on what role the U.S. could play in creating a lasting and durable peace in Mindanao. There was also considerable interest in exchange programs.

DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE SHOWS U.S. COMMITMENT

¶10. (SBU) In nearby Lanao del Norte Province, DCM joined Governor Dimaporo to inaugurate USAID's Abaga-Buenavista Road Upgrading Project, one of 830 community infrastructure projects constructed over the past four years as part of USAID's Growth and Equity in Mindanao (GEM) program. The U.S.-educated, 27-year old Governor told the enthusiastic crowd of villagers and children at the ribbon-cutting that, as a result of U.S. assistance projects, "we believe the leader of the Free World cares about us." The governor, a descendent of Lanao's sultan, lauded American assistance for being non-political, with no strings attached.

¶11. (U) In Marawi City, DCM formally handed over a USAID Computer Literacy and Internet Connection (CLIC) assistance package consisting of a wireless broadband Internet connection, computer equipment, and resource materials to the Parent-Teacher-Community Association and school administration of Marawi Islamic Computer College. Although per student expenditure on education within the ARMM is less than U.S. \$100 per year, resulting in poor scores on standardized achievement tests, students and administrators noted that CLIC resources now make it possible to receive a first-class education without leaving Marawi. Hundreds of students waving homemade American flags greeted DCM and party.

AFP COORDINATION

¶12. (U) The DCM called on the local Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Deputy Commander Colonel Paglan and visited the co-located U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force - Local Coordination Element (JSOTF-LCE). Colonel Paglan recalled the peaceful Marawi of his childhood in the early 1960s, when many tourists, including Americans, visited the lake-side city. He reported a stable security environment and good liaison with local MILF commanders. He appreciated the support of the U.S. Liaison Element.

MEDIA COVERAGE

¶13. (SBU) Regional print and TV media outlets covered the USAID events and DCM's "Peace Week" remarks. In a live radio interview heard throughout Marawi City, DCM emphasized the overarching theme of the trip - that the American people believe in the future of Mindanao and believe that it will be peaceful and prosperous. The only challenging issue from the media was the perennial question about whether the U.S. is establishing "secret bases" in Mindanao, which DCM firmly denied. The DCM explained that USAID program initiatives in Mindanao, including GEM III, demonstrate that the American people want to contribute to Mindanao's development.

KENNEY